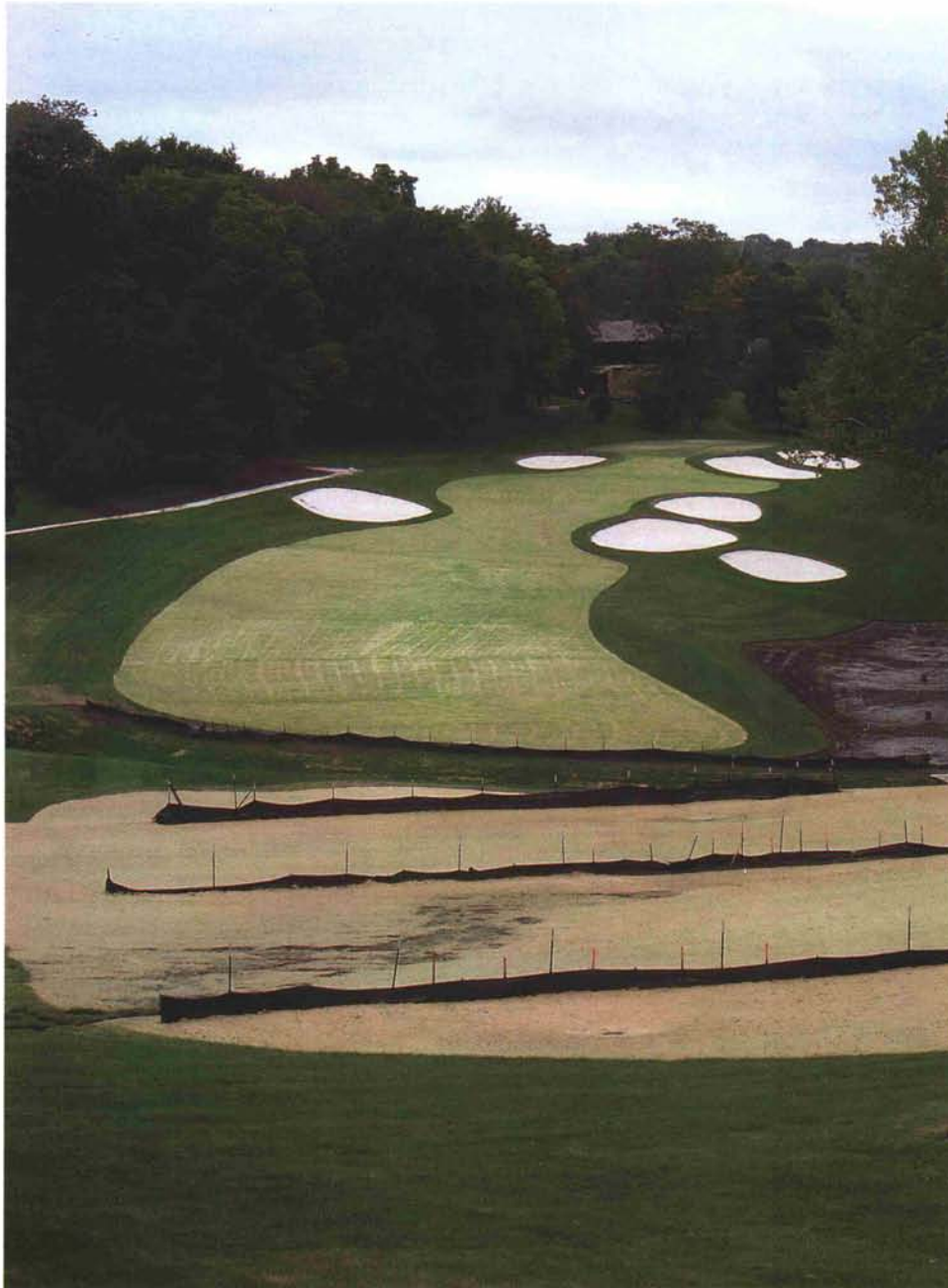


Don't Get Washed Away

New advances in erosion control blankets are shifting the decision to seeding versus sodding.

BY HAL PHILLIPS



To prevent soil erosion on large areas, such as newly constructed fairways, superintendents in many areas of the country are beginning to recognize the value of improved erosion control blankets.

Progress — a new way of doing something that is an improvement on current operating procedures. Recent advances in the manufacturing of erosion control blankets provide a different twist, however, in that they allow superintendents, contractors, and architects to move ahead by doing something an old-fashioned way.

That time-tested method is establishing new turf areas via seeding, as opposed to sodding. Everyone agrees that seeding takes a little longer, but the turf health benefits, such as stronger root development, are usually superior to those yielded by sod. Yes, there are further downsides to seeding: one can only seed in cool-season climates during certain windows of time, and on steep inclines, like bunker faces, sod has traditionally provided a leg up in terms of erosion control.

In comparison to sod, seeded areas will always take longer to grow in. But, according to superintendents and architects involved in construction projects, the new generation of blankets provides comparable erosion control and actually lengthens the fall germination window. What's more, the addition of erosion control blankets to the seeding process does not change the bottom line: seed and blankets are more economical than sod. And that saving can continue over time, given the man-hours a superintendent must spend hand-watering and repairing sodded bunker faces whose establishment may never overcome an incompatible soil layer issue.

“What we definitely see happening across the country is that turf conditions in the rough and, in particular, on bunker faces are subject to increasing expectations,” says Paul Vermeulen, former USGA Director of the Mid-Continent Region. “Perfection on the putting surface is expected. Fairways, too. And we’re quickly getting to the point where that sort of standard is expected every day on areas like bunker faces. It’s achieving that sort of perfection with the imperfect legacy of sodding that is getting troublesome.”

“If our path is to try and produce the best stand of turf around bunkers and greens, we need to be honest about how best to establish that turf. If it’s better to seed, let’s seed. And, if the only thing keeping us from that is erosion and a narrow establishment window, then let’s try something new. I’m not plugging one erosion control product over another, but this is an improving technology that, over the past several years, has made tremendous strides.”

Of course, the main thing that keeps superintendents, contractors, and architects from going with seed is time, not erosion. On a new course project, the decision to sod or seed is often reached before a golf course superintendent is even on site. Still, it is the superintendent who is left holding the bag.

“Suppose you have a limited construction window. Put simply, that becomes the guiding force in all the other decisions that follow,” explains Bob Lohmann, whose design firm, Lohmann Golf Designs, has been a leading proponent of seeding/blanketing for the last decade. “One of the options that contractors tend to latch onto very quickly is the idea of establishing a large part of a property with sod, because now you have more time to build. But that’s giving in to poor planning. We just opened a course called Blackstone G.C. [Marengo, Illinois], where we had about a seven- to eight-month construction window, which is fast by any standard, and we



One of the most common methods for controlling soil erosion and establishing a stable worksite for equipment operation is to surround newly constructed areas with sod. Given recent improvements in erosion control blanket technology, however, superintendents can do equally well with seeding.



Taming soil erosion on new construction sites, superintendents, architects, and golf course builders are turning to the use of improved erosion control blankets.



With improvements in erosion control blankets, their use on new construction sites is on the rise. In addition to being less expensive, high-quality blankets extend the establishment window of cool-season turf species and provide better-than-expected ground stabilization.

were able to complete the entire project with seed and blanket.”

“With a renovation, because you’ve closed a portion of the course, everyone is even more interested in getting the work done as fast as possible. So, the pressure to sod is even greater. In cool-season climates like the Midwest, you need to seed renovated holes and features by about September 15th. But, what if you don’t make that deadline? Well, the decision to sod gets easier and easier for a project manager, who doesn’t necessarily factor in the long-term downsides: the poor rooting of turf for years to come and the need for repeated core aeration (on a bunker face!) to disturb the layer of soil imported with the sod.

“All these downsides are left to the superintendent. The project manager looks good when he walks off the property. He finished ‘on time.’ But the superintendent deals with the consequences.”

Lohmann admits that, until blanket technology improved over the last five years, sodding was still the preferred method of erosion control. And, because bunker reconstruction is such a routine staple of course renovation, the sodding of new bunker faces quickly became standard practice.

“Today, however, the more expensive blankets will stabilize the seeded area on steep slopes just as well as sod,” he says. “They also hold the moisture for you, so the seed will germinate quicker. A great example of this is a driving range project we did for Chenequa Country Club [Hartland, Wisconsin]. Because of budget limitations, we seeded and blanketed only the very steep sloping area immediately below the tee. In the range itself, which is mildly sloped, we seeded with no blankets. Chenequa was hit with some pretty major storms right after the seeding, and they’re still struggling with the low areas where the seed and

topsoil were washed away. But, the slopes around the tee are perfect. In the long run, cutting money on erosion control early in the budget process probably cost the club more money — in washout repairs.”

Brad Minnick, CGCS, is the head golf course superintendent at Lawrence Country Club in Kansas, which closed down in July 2005 for a comprehensive, 18-hole renovation. Minnick had originally specified sod for his new bunker faces (“I had used straw blankets in the past and didn’t enjoy success.”), but during a Turf Advisory Service visit Paul Vermeulen suggested he try seeding again — this time with the new generation of blankets.

“Paul turned me on to the idea and once I tried it on a trial basis, it was obviously going to be the better solution,” says Minnick, whose course reopened in September 2006. “I always believed that seeding was best, but that erosion was the problem that sod



Sodding steep banks around new bunkers has gained wide acceptance because it yields quick results and provides excellent erosion control. Maintaining the turf in good condition long-term, however, can necessitate the installation of pop-up sprinklers to compensate for poor root development.

helped cure. I don't believe that anymore. It's a leap of faith, going with blankets. It's not mainstream. But, it works."

The time pressures will never go away, but neither will the obvious cost savings. When the renovation budget was put together in Lawrence, for example, there was a line item for one acre of sod; the remaining 60 acres were to be seeded with no erosion control. By going with seed and blankets on that one acre and eliminating the sodding line item, there was money available to blanket 40 of the 60 remaining acres.

Lohmann sees the beginning of a sea change in the way the golf industry views sodding. He sees the rest of the golf industry coming his way.

"The practice of sodding has, over time, become more and more popular, but I think we've reached a point where enough courses are having long-term problems that we need to

pull back," he says. "It's one thing to sod a fairway or two because you've run out of time, but sodding around elaborate bunker contours is just a bad idea. Sure it's difficult to aerate a 10-degree slope, but what about the man-hours you devote to something like that? And, what about the man-hours you need to hand-water those sodded areas during establishment — or the supplemental sprinkler heads you need to install to care for those sodded bunker faces long term?"

"Ten years ago, we never saw pop-up heads around bunker banks, but now it's becoming commonplace. We do a lot of classic course renovation, and you never see an 80-year-old course with pop-up heads around bunkers. They don't need it. But when you visit an 80-year-old course that's been renovated with sodded bunker faces, you see it all the time because the turf isn't healthy. That should tell you something."

Another sodding misconception is that an area around a newly constructed green or tee needs to be partially or completely sodded in order to access that green or tee with equipment, such as mowers. "Many think that a bridge of sod is the only option," Vermeulen says. "People assume that if you seed and follow up with an erosion control blanket, the ground won't be stable enough. But it is stable enough. We all went to school and learned things one way, and then we had that reinforced in the field. This sort of change has to start with superintendents because they understand the long-term as well as the short-term. They have to be the spokespersons for this improving technology."

HAL PHILLIPS is a former editor of Golf Course News and a freelance writer based in Maine, where the season is short and sweet.